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C O N F I D E N T I A L BAKU 000336

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TAGS: PHUM PGOV PREL KDEM AJ

SUBJECT: UPDATES IN THE CASE OF STABBED JOURNALIST AGIL KHALIL

REF: A. BAKU 167
¶B. BAKU 257

Classified By: POL/ECON CHIEF JOAN POLASCHIK PER 1.4(B,D).

¶1. (SBU) Over the past week, the GOAJ has been taking action in connection with the February 22 and March 13 attacks on opposition Azadliq newspaper correspondent Agil Khalil (reflets). On April 1, police arrested Natiq Allahverdiyev, the owner of the Olive Gardens, in connection with the February 22 incident, in which Khalil was beaten while attempting to photograph the destruction of olive trees. Allahverdiyev is charged with a procedural issue and possible ecological violations, rather than with the attack itself.

¶2. (SBU) On April 3, four investigators from the Prosecutor General's Office (PGO) reportedly questioned Khalil at his home in the Kurdemir region for six to eight hours. According to statement's made by Khalil's attorneys at a widely publicized news conference, the investigators reportedly demanded that Khalil "confess" that he is homosexual and that either his colleagues or a homosexual acquaintance were responsible for the March 13 attack, in which Khalil was stabbed. They reportedly threatened to release a video showing a man stating that he had a homosexual relationship with Khalil, if the journalist did not drop his charges.

¶3. (SBU) On April 4, the interrogators brought Khalil to the PGO in Baku, where he was held and questioned for 15 hours, and released at approximately 02:00 on April 5. During this period, Khalil reportedly was forced to confront a man named Sergey regarding their alleged homosexual relationship. Khalil reportedly knew "Sergey" because he had rented an apartment from him two or three years ago.

¶4. (C) Acting Azadliq newspaper Editor-In-Chief Azer Ahmadov publicly maintains that Ministry of National Security officers were responsible for the March 13 attack on Khalil. Ahmadov stated that the allegations regarding Khalil's homosexual activity were blackmail against the newspaper, intended to force its closure prior to the October presidential election. Local human rights activists dismissed Allahverdiyev's arrest as insignificant and believe he will be released in a few days. ISHR Azerbaijan branch Chair Saadat Benanyarly said that she does not believe "Sergey" was involved in the attack; she said the police have a list of known homosexuals whom they call upon to testify in cases like this. Turan News Agency Director Mehman Aliyev told PAO that the real issue in Khalil's case is the economic interests of those involved with the Olive Gardens -- rumored to include the President's uncle and Member of Parliament Jalal Aliyev -- and that the attack on Khalil is a side-story.

¶5. (C) COMMENT: While the April 1 arrest of Allahverdiyev in connection with Khalil's case was a positive step, the introduction of Soviet-style pressures and allegations regarding Khalil's sexual orientation is disturbing. We will continue to press the GOAJ to rigorously investigate and prosecute the individuals responsible for the attacks on Khalil and the other journalists who have been subjected to acts of physical violence.

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